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FRANÇOIS LAMY AND THE RHETORIC OF ATTENTION OF MALEBRANCHE

THOMAS M. CARR, JR.

FRANÇOIS Lamy is always mentioned in the lively polemic over rhetoric touched off in 1694 by the attack of Goibaud Dubois against pulpit eloquence.¹ The Benedictine Lamy became the center of the controversy when a 1698 *éclaircissement* of his *De la connaissance de soi-même* (5 vols. Paris, 1694-1698) provided the most thorough critique of the ancient art the quarrel produced.² Malebranche himself did not participate directly in this dispute, but since he had made similar criticisms in passing in the *Recherche de la vérité* (1674) his presence was constantly felt in the background.

This resemblance is no coincidence. According to Fr. André, an eighteenth-century biographer of Malebranche, Lamy "passoit dans la Républ. des lettres pour un imitateur servile du P.M."³ Just the same, André notes that Lamy was perfectly capable of taking independent positions. For example, when another 1698 *éclaircissement* linked Malebranche to certain Quietist doctrines, the Oratorian felt compelled to defend himself in print. Thus we can wonder to what extent Lamy's criticisms of rhetoric reflect Malebranche's stance. A

¹ For the most recent discussion see Bernard Tocanne, *L'idée de nature en France dans la seconde moitié du XVII^e siècle* (Paris, 1978), pp. 436-446.

² Although Descartes admired the force and beauty of eloquence, there is a deep current of mistrust for rhetoric in his thought. François Lamy here gives us perhaps the most extensive and systematic attack against rhetoric based on Cartesian principles. Some twenty years earlier the Oratorian Bernard Lamy had tried to apply Cartesian notions in a more constructive way in *L'Art de parler* (1675), where Pascal's more positive influence is also apparent.

³ André, "Extrait de la vie du P. Malebranche" in *Traité de l'amour de Dieu, Œuvres complètes de Malebranche*, ed. André Robinet et al., 21 vols. (Paris, 1962-1969), XIV, xxiii. All references to Malebranche are from this edition and the *Recherche*, unless otherwise indicated.

second eighteenth-century biographer, J. F. Adry, points out that while Malebranche was named in the dispute over eloquence, he refused to intervene: "ce qu'on pouvoit lui faire dire pour ou contre la rhétorique le touchoit moins que la question subtile et délicate qui avoit brouillé les deux grands prélats de CAMBRAI et de MEAUX."⁴ Lamy's position was that eloquence, by its very nature, cannot lead to a knowledge of spiritual entities like God, angels or the soul (V. 436-437) and that it corrupts man's heart and mind (V. 378). Was Malebranche's silence due to agreement with Lamy or to his well known desire to avoid polemics?

Although Lamy does not invoke Malebranche in his *éclaircissement*, he follows the general lines of the Oratorian's analysis. First, Lamy takes aim at eloquence directed at the imagination and heart rather than at the reason: "l'art d'aller à l'esprit par le cœur et d'aller au cœur par l'imagination, l'art de persuader, sans raison" (V. 377). Such a criticism echoes Malebranche's famous attacks against writers like Seneca who persuaded by stirring up the imagination and emotions, rather than by providing "l'évidence des raisons" (I. 345). Second, this description of eloquence leads to an identification of rhetoric with the stylistic devices that arouse the emotions and imagination. Lamy speaks of "figures," "ornemens," and "mouvements" (V. 377). Malebranche mentions the cadence of prose, figures of speech (I. 180), and "couleurs sensibles" (II. 260), along with the orator's delivery (I. 178). In so doing, both limit the province of rhetoric to *elocutio* and *pronuntiatio*, leaving aside *inventio* and *dispositio*, which had traditionally been concerned with the more intellectual tasks of the discovery and arrangement of proofs.

Perhaps most important is that Lamy grounds his distrust of rhetoric on Malebranche's interpretation of Cartesian psychophysiology. Lamy's preface asserts that his treatise is unique because of its use of "principes naturels et physiques" (I. n. pag.), but when he systematically explains how eloquence operates in terms of the relation between soul and body, he only develops Malebranche's famous remark that the tracings in the brain left by the passage of animal

⁴ J. F. Adry, "Précis de la vie de Malebranche" in *Malebranche vivant, Œuvres complètes de Malebranche*, XX, 353.

spirits are "le fondement de toutes les figures de la Rhétorique" (I. 222).

Malebranche's misgivings about imaginative and emotional persuasion stem from his view of the union of the body and mind. The imagination, which allows us to visualize absent material beings as if they were present, must be distrusted as a form of sense perception. When objects in the extended world are perceived, the flow of animal spirits registers the data from the senses as tiny grooves in the brain. Grooves that are imprinted at the same time are grouped together in the brain, and when one is reactivated by the imagination, the others associated with it are as well. This "liaison mutuelles des traces" explains the evocative power of rhetorical figures (I. 222). Unfortunately, these "idées sensibles," unlike what Malebranche calls "idées pures" or "intellectuelles," can only inform us about the relation of material objects to ourselves; they cannot provide any true knowledge of the objects themselves because we have been given sense perception only for the conservation of our bodies (I. 186). Moreover, Malebranche maintains that the senses have a greater attraction for the mind because they penetrate it more completely than the "idées pures" which remain external to it (I. 177). When attracted by the senses and imagination, the mind must struggle intensely to maintain attention on the abstract, higher "idées pures" (II. 251).

This danger is reinforced by the "communication contagieuse des imaginations fortes" (I. 320), men whose minds are wholly dominated by the mental pictures that result from the deep tracings left by sense impressions (I. 323). Their use of vivid images and impassioned delivery gives them exceptional persuasive ability (I. 329). The passions are a no less dangerous cause of error. Like sense perceptions or the imagination, they are occasioned by a movement of animal spirits, but affect the will rather than the understanding. They not only push the will into hasty conclusions, but are more strongly attracted by sensible objects than to spiritual truths (II. 175).

Malebranche was content to point out the role of the emotions and imagination in persuasion as a warning of sorts not to be deceived by them (III. 119). Lamy goes farther, affirming that such rhetoric is "nuisible à la perfection de l'esprit et du cœur" (V. 378). To prove this, he takes up all the elements of Malebranche's

analysis — the “traces profondes” in the brain (V. 390), the distinction between pure and sensible ideas (V. 392), the contagious power of the imagination (V. 409), the sequence of steps by which the emotions are excited (V. 432) to conclude that rhetoric corrupts the mind by weakening its ability to maintain the judgment in suspension. He insists that rhetoric should only be studied after the judgment has been formed (V. 449). This negative conclusion is perhaps implied in Malebranche’s position, but the Oratorian does not seem to have drawn it explicitly.

To be sure, Lamy’s stance is not completely hostile. For example, he is careful to distinguish between the “false” eloquence which appeals to the heart and to the imagination and “true” eloquence which only speaks to these faculties *after* having enlightened the mind (V. 378). Lamy will even allow a speaker to address the imagination in order to reach the understanding, as long as he refrains from unduly stirring it up (III. 131). These concessions, however, can be found for the most part in Malebranche, whose attitude is considerably more favorable.

One reason for this more positive view is epistemological. In the Cartesian tradition, error is avoided and truth attained by a dual effort of the will that suspends the judgment and keeps the attention focused until clear and distinct ideas have been obtained. Lamy tends to emphasize the deleterious effects of imaginative and emotional rhetoric on the will’s ability to suspend the judgment. On the other hand, Malebranche stresses the active role of attention in the search for truth. Attention is not just intense intellectual concentration; it is the “*prière naturelle que nous faisons à la Vérité intérieure*” (*Conversations chrétiennes*, IV. 11) in whom we see all truth according to Malebranche’s doctrine of vision in God. In metaphysics attention is the “*combat de l’esprit contre les impressions du corps*” (*Entretiens sur la métaphysique*, XII. 32). Although impressions from the body like sense perceptions or the passions usually interfere with the attention, the *Recherche* describes how under certain conditions the imagination or an emotion like admiration can be used to focus and maintain attention rather than destroying it (II. 205-206, 259). This insight provides a theoretical basis for the use of the sensible in eloquence; it justifies what Malebranche might have called a rhetoric

of attention in which appeals to the imagination and emotions serve to strengthen the mind's attention. He affirms that such traditional rhetorical devices as figures of speech or impassioned delivery have a necessary place, especially when dealing with questions of religion or morality (III. 126).

Malebranche's concept of the Incarnation, which he considered the central Christian mystery, furnishes a second basis for this rhetoric of attention. He saw the Incarnation in rhetorical terms as God's way of using the sensible to draw fallen man's attention to higher truth: "... il faut exposer aux autres la vérité, comme la vérité même s'est exposée. Les hommes depuis le péché de leur père, ayant la vûë trop faible pour considerer la vérité en elle-même, cette souveraine vérité s'est renduë sensible en se couvrant de nôtre humanité, afin d'attirer nos regards... Ainsi on peut à son exemple couvrir de quelque chose de sensible les véritez que nous voulons comprendre & enseigner aux autres, afin d'arrêter l'esprit qui aime le sensible, & qui ne se prend aisément que par quelque chose qui flatte les sens. La Sagesse éternelle s'est renduë sensible, mais non dans l'eclat... non pour nous arrêter au sensible, mais pour nous élever à l'intelligible" (II. 260-261).

The Incarnation thus becomes Malebranche's model for human eloquence. First, it exemplifies the key rhetorical principle alluded to in the *Conversations chrétiennes* (IV. 4) that the message must be adapted to its audience. Second, it illustrates how sense impressions can be properly used to direct the attention toward higher truth and to make this truth attractive. Finally, the Incarnation indicates the limits of the sensible, which must be used with prudence so as not to dazzle or distract the mind from its true goal (II. 259-260).

Thus, Malebranche's failure to comment on Lamy's strictures should not be taken as a sign of complete agreement. This would not be the only occasion when Lamy's contentious disposition pushed him to extreme positions. Although his critique develops in a systematic fashion scattered remarks on persuasion and rhetoric in Malebranche, Lamy's emphasis on the judgment ignores the favorable elements in the Oratorian's writings which point to the possibility of a reformed rhetoric of attention modeled on the Incarnation.